

Cautious Courage About Lithuania

Soviet and Lithuanian leaders both have shown signs of losing their sense of restraint in recent days. That's all the more reason to welcome the cautious courage of President Bush and other Western leaders. They understand the dangers of choosing sides and refuse to be drawn into one-sided Soviet-bashing.

There's right on both sides. Lithuanians are a distinct nation who were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union — and have a right to independence. President Gorbachev has the responsibility to preserve the Soviet Union, or at least to insure that secession of some parts does not ignite the dissolution of the whole.

The new Lithuanian government insists it is already independent and is prepared to negotiate only the details of separation from Moscow. Soviet leaders say they are prepared to allow eventual secession — if Lithuania agrees to follow constitutional procedures, as yet unspecified.

The interest of the United States and the West is to help Lithuania secure independence sooner rather than later, but not at any particular time and not in a way that undermines the reform movement in the Soviet Union. The best way to advance that interest is to keep urging a compromise path on both Moscow and Vilnius.

The White House deftly kept a balance yesterday, even as pressures mounted to denounce Moscow in Congress and among Lithuanian-Americans. Marlin Fitzwater, the spokesman, rightly put the main burden on Moscow by saying that anything other than a peaceful process risks hurting the

Soviet Union and Soviet-American relations. But he sensibly declined to define words like "force" and "intimidation," and draw lines that could only inflame matters.

"Undoubtedly this is a very difficult situation, both for President Gorbachev and the people of Lithuania," said Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain. "It calls for great restraint on both sides. Force is not an appropriate way to settle this petition . . . it will not help to be provocative in any way on either side."

Events in Lithuania now could tumble quickly out of control. Moscow may be going beyond intimidation and trying to provoke a crisis. The Red Army forcibly removed deserters from a hospital and occupied buildings. Soviet leaders appear to be inciting Polish and Russian minorities in Lithuania; if ethnic hostility turns violent, Moscow could use this as a pretext for intervention.

Most ominously, the Soviet Foreign Ministry yesterday criticized the West for meddling in Soviet internal affairs and ordered all foreigners out of Lithuania. But President Landsbergis also seems to be losing his cool. He said yesterday the Bush Administration had "sold out" Lithuania to pursue better Soviet-American relations.

Such remarks are bound to resonate in the United States, among Lithuania's many friends and among citizens who see an underdog people standing up to an imperial bully. That, however, is a one-sided impression. Americans want to see Lithuania liberated, but the U.S. Government can advance that goal only with a very careful hand.